

Where Pentecost Meets the Flame of Ecstasy

Pentecost, the middle child of Christian holidays—wedged inconspicuously between an earnest Easter and a flamboyant Christmas—is this Sunday. (If you didn't know, I told you it's inconspicuous!)

Most of us have got down pat how to celebrate Easter and Christmas, but it's not easy to know how to celebrate Pentecost. I've seen red balloons symbolizing tongues of fire, a dove on the end of a fishing rod symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit and lots of wrinkled red, fire-hued, sweaters pulled out of a drawer.

I think we can do better.

Believers can figure out how to make the most of Pentecost this year by looking back at the first Pentecost of all, when Jesus' friends, family and followers were praying together in one place. Suddenly, a wind blew into their house, fiery tongues sat on each of them, the Holy Spirit filled them and they began to give testimony in a host of languages—other tongues—to God's many acts throughout history (Acts 2:1-13). A lot was going on during that first Pentecost. What can we make of all this?

Two Christianities

What we make of Pentecost depends on what sort of Christianity we're part of. So, before we go too far back in time to that first Pentecost, let's face a nagging divide in Christianity.

One side of Christianity is reflected in this description of the Cane Ridge revival in 1801:

A vast crowd, supposed by some to have amounted to 25,000, was

collected together. The noise was like the roar of Niagara. ... Some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy in the most piteous accents, while others were shouting most vociferously.

My heart beat tumultuously, my knees trembled, my lip quivered and I felt as though I must fall to the ground. ... The scene that then presented itself to my mind was indescribable. At one time I saw at least 500 swept down in a moment, as if a battery of a thousand guns had been opened upon them, and then immediately followed shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens.

This is unbridled ecstasy, pure and simple.

Now take a look at an invitation I received a few years back in a church newsletter to attend a “Pentecostal Salsa Social: Hearts Aflame—Mouths Afire!”

“All are invited to our Pentecost celebration on Sunday, May 31st, after second service in the Fellowship Hall. Our hearts will be burning with the Holy Spirit and our mouths will be on fire with chips and salsa. Not only will we be celebrating Pentecost with chips and salsa, but there will also be margaritas (non-alcoholic, of course) and lively Latin music. ... At this social, you won’t expect shrieking or shouting or bodies melted on the floor. The only action members of this church will take is maybe to fan their salsa-filled mouths and put pen to paper to vote for elected church officers.”

It’s as if there are two Christianities; the one birthed by ecstasy and the other dying without it. Will they ever meet? They can—if they are willing to return to Pentecost in all its splendid fullness.

The Flame of Ecstasy

The story of Pentecost offers a clinic in ecstasy. There is filling with the Spirit, fire and apparent drunkenness. If you

were a first-or-second century Roman reader, you'd see ecstasy here with a capital E. Filling with the spirit would remind you of the mysterious cave at Delphi, where the priestess prophesied when a peculiar, inspiring *pneuma* (spirit) filled her.

Fire, a vivid image of inspiration in the Roman world, would call to mind prophets, male and female, who boiled over with fierce fire when they spoke the words of God. Even the cynical charge of being drunk with new wine would have reminded you of Roman writers, who compared the fire of inspiration to the effects of wine, which heated the body, enlarging (as heat does) channels of inspiration, and making prophets especially open to ideas they could not recognize when sober. It looks as if the Christians at Cane Ridge were right. The Holy Spirit inspires ecstasy.

But That's Not All

Ecstasy. Elation. Euphoria, even. Overwhelmed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the power from on high Jesus had promised *twice* (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8). That's the first half of the story of Pentecost. An essential half. An indispensable half. An electrifying half. But still only half.

The rest of the story lies in some other details of the inspiring story of that first Pentecost—a story that can be ours, as well. {eo}

Note: This is the first of a two-part series on Pentecost. Look for part two Friday evening on .

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